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A STEADY FIRST STEP

BY TOM DICKSON

When George Killebrew aimed his rifle at an approaching wolf the morning of October 27, 2009, he didn't know whether he would shoot. "I had real mixed feelings about killing a wolf," says the Hamilton electrician, who has been hunting in the Bitterroot Valley since moving there 12 years ago. "Part of me sees the wolf as a sacred animal. But I also think there are too many of them."

Killebrew was hunting south of Darby when the wolf emerged from the forest and began moving toward where he sat hidden in a field. He'd been looking for elk since early September—first with his bow and now with a rifle in the general big game season—and had not encountered a single one. "Every year I see lots of elk, and I always get one," he says. "Not this year. But I saw a lot of wolf tracks, more than ever." Killebrew had purchased a wolf license, but he wasn't sure he would use it, even as the wolf drew closer from across the field. "I'm the kind of person who was glad they reintroduced wolves, because I like things to be as wild as possible," he says.

CONSTANT MONITORING

A total of 72 of the 15,603 hunters who bought a wolf license were successful last year in Montana's first regulated wolf hunt. The season opened September 15 in back-

What Montana learned from its first regulated wolf hunting season

country areas and continued with the general big game season, which began October 25. State wildlife officials closed the wolf season three weeks later, on November 16, when hunters were nearing the quota of 75 set by the FWP Commission the previous summer.

Ken McDonald, FWP Wildlife chief, says not exceeding the quota was one indication Montana can effectively manage and administer a wolf hunting season. In addition, no more than four wolves were taken from any one pack, and the harvest was well distributed across the three wolf management units. "Those results are important for maintaining a healthy and viable wolf population in Montana," says McDonald. "We've said all along that that is the state's goal, even as we go forward with public hunting seasons."

According to Carolyn Sime, FWP statewide wolf coordinator, the agency kept

close tabs on the wolf harvest using the same computer-based quota tracking system it employs for other species that have harvest quotas, such as mountain lions, bobcats, and furbearers. FWP required successful wolf hunters to report their kill within 12 hours so that biologists could closely monitor harvest in each wolf management unit. Hunters were also required to bring their wolf to an FWP office within ten days of harvesting the animal. Agency staff collected biological information from each wolf to determine the animal's age, sex, reproductive status, weight, color, and, in most cases, which pack it belonged to.

Another revelation from the inaugural season was that hunters can successfully harvest wolves. "We really didn't know how it would work out, because there never had been a regulated wolf hunting season in the lower 48 states," says McDonald. "We knew that hunters see wolves while out hunting deer and elk, but there was some doubt about how effective they would be hunting wolves."

Though the quota was lower than what many hunters wanted, Montana's first wolf hunt appeared to reduce animosity toward the carnivores. "We expected that hunters' attitudes toward wolves would change once they had a wolf tag in their pocket, and that's what happened," says Jim Williams, FWP regional wildlife manager in Kalispell. "In 2008 we had complaints about wolves all season long. But last year during the first three

"This first hunt was a learning experience. We really didn't know how it would work out, because there never had been a wolf season in the lower 48 states."



GATHERING INFORMATION As it does with other harvested game animals, FWP staff members collected biological data from wolves taken by hunters during Montana's first regulated wolf hunting season.

KENTON ROWE

weeks of the big game season, when wolves were legal, we heard almost nothing in the way of complaints from hunters. When we closed the season, complaints started up again.”

Quentin Kujala, FWP Wildlife Management Section supervisor, says hunters are more likely to tolerate carnivores they can hunt and may even become advocates for the species. “That’s been the case with lions and black bears, and we believe it will happen with wolves, where you’ll have some hunters pushing for wolf conservation like they do for other large carnivores that offer hunting opportunities,” he says.

That’s one reason many state and national conservation groups such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation support a regulated wolf hunting season. Another is that they agree with Montana and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) that the Rocky Mountain gray wolf population has fully recovered. The population reached the federal recovery goal in 2002 and has been growing since. In 2009, the USFWS delisted the wolf in Montana and Idaho, allowing the two states to proceed with state management plans that include regulated hunting seasons.

Montana wildlife officials say the hunt was necessary not only to manage the population

MONTANA'S FIRST REGULATED WOLF SEASON

Licenses and hunters

- 15,603 licenses purchased (15,514 residents, 89 nonresidents)
- 12% of Montana resident elk hunters bought a wolf license in 2009
- license cost: \$19 (resident), \$350 (nonresident)
- total license revenue: \$325,916
- 69 of 72 successful wolf hunters were Montana residents

Wolf age and sex

- 27 adults: 38% of total harvest
- 22 yearlings: 31% of total harvest
- 22 juveniles: 31% of total harvest
- 1 age unknown
- 41 males, 31 females

Average weight

- adults: 97 pounds (largest: 117 pounds)
- yearlings: 80 pounds
- juveniles: 62 pounds

but also because numbers had grown to the point where public support for wolves in Montana was eroding. “When there are too many of any wildlife species, you can start having problems and there has to be some population management,” says McDonald. “The best way for that has always been with regulated public hunting. We want to keep Montana’s wolf population healthy, but we also need to retain a reasonable balance of wolves, other wildlife, and human values.”

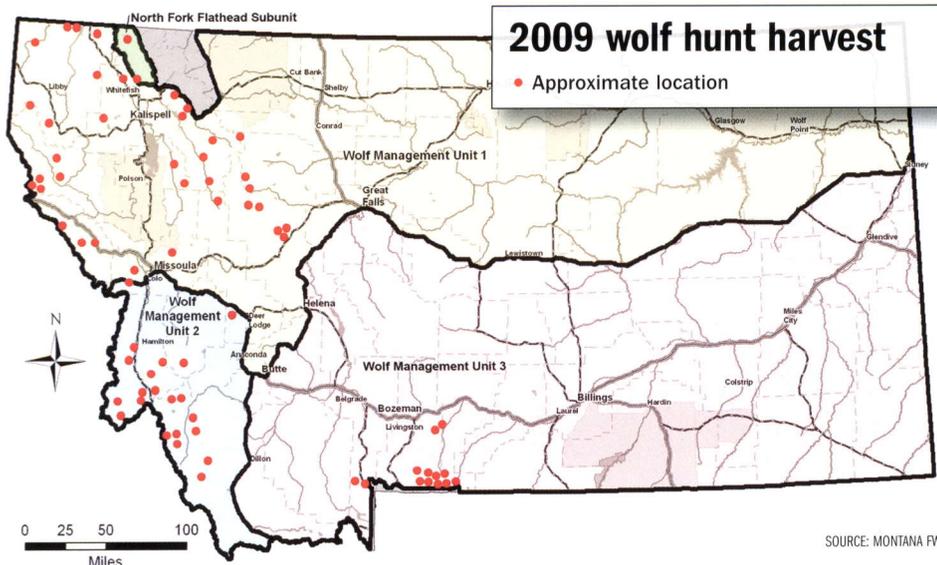
SOME ARGUE: TOO SOON

But some groups, like the Natural Resources Defense Council and Defenders of Wildlife, say it’s too soon for hunters to target a species only recently removed from the endangered species list. The environmental organizations maintain that Montana and Idaho should wait until wolf populations are stronger before considering public hunting. Among their concerns is that wolf hunting might hamper wolf dispersal and reduce genetic connectivity among subpopulations of the three recovery zones (Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, northwestern Montana and central Idaho).

Federal and state biologists say genetic isolation is not currently a problem and appears improbable in the future because wolves are so mobile. McDonald notes that wolves

regularly disperse, sometimes over long distances. Wolves have been tracked traveling 30 to 50 miles in a day and 500 miles in a year. One pack, near St. Regis, Montana, contains a wolf that originated from a pack near Boise, Idaho, about 250 miles away, McDonald says. What’s more, researchers have documented broad genetic diversity in the current Northern Rockies wolf population. “We recognize that genetic connectivity is important for wildlife species, and we know that allowing wolves from the three recovery zones to intermix enables them to function as a single large population rather than three smaller, isolated populations,” McDonald says. “But we don’t see genetic diversity as a problem for our wolves at this time, and we don’t expect it to become an issue in the future.”

One criticism of the hunt is that it did not target “problem” wolves that prey on livestock. “Some thought FWP should direct hunters to areas with depredation problems, but others said most of the harvest should be in backcountry areas where big game hunters are,” says McDonald. “We tried to distribute harvest across the landscape and manage the overall wolf population while providing hunting opportunity.





JAMIE & LISA JOHNSON

RELEASE VALVE FWP maintains that having the opportunity to hunt wolves can build tolerance among hunters for keeping the carnivores in Montana. "That's been the case with lions and black bears, and we believe it will happen with wolves," says one agency official.

"Of course we hope wolf hunting will help reduce livestock depredation, and in the future we'll try to increase harvest in certain trouble spots," he adds. "But this first year we didn't intend to concentrate harvest on any one place, and instead we relied on hunter activity to spread the harvest across relatively large management units."

According to McDonald, wolves were killed from roughly ten packs that had a history of encounters with livestock or domestic dogs. "That suggests to us that hunting can help reduce wolf conflicts by reducing pack size in those areas, even if that's not the main objective of the season," he says.

Another complaint is that because most of the harvest took place during the September backcountry season in one wolf management unit, many general-season hunters didn't have an opportunity to hunt wolves. "We understand that concern," says McDonald. "And in the future we'll propose spreading out hunting opportunity to make it more equitable. Again, keep in mind that this was only Montana's first year of wolf hunting. It's still a learning experience for everyone involved."

KEEPING A HANDLE ON THINGS

As the wolf continued to draw to within 150 yards from where he waited in the Bitterroot Valley pasture, Killebrew made his decision and fired once, then again. "I don't like to kill something I'm not going to eat, but I feel like I did the right thing," he says, adding that the wolf pelt is being tanned by a local taxidermist. "I don't think we should ever kill something out of existence, but there are too many wolves out here. They're getting too brazen. Last year we had wolves kill a deer in our backyard, 6 feet from our back porch.

"I think we should have everything in the woods, from grizzlies on down," Killebrew adds. "But you can't have too many of one species. You have to manage all the wildlife and keep a handle on things for the good of all." 🐾

View the 2009 Montana Wolf Hunting Season Report on-line at fwp.mt.gov (look for "Montana Wolves" under "Fish and Wildlife" on the front page). Or request a copy by calling (406) 444-2535.

A 2010 HUNT?

The likelihood of a 2010 wolf hunt is uncertain. U.S. District Court Judge Donald Molloy in Missoula is currently considering a lawsuit that seeks to rescind the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's (USFWS) 2009 decision to delist wolves in all the Northern Rocky Mountain Recovery Area except Wyoming. The plaintiffs argue it is still too soon for wolves to be removed from federal protection. A decision is expected later this spring or summer.

Last year Judge Molloy denied a motion by the plaintiffs for an injunction to stop the 2009 wolf hunts in Montana and Idaho. But at the time he also indicated that the USFWS may have violated the federal Endangered Species Act when it dropped Wyoming from its decision to delist wolves elsewhere in the region. If true, that could mean wolves may need to be relisted under legal requirements of the ESA.

Montana officials support the USFWS delisting decision, agreeing with the federal agency that wolves are recovered and that the recovery requirement of genetic exchange among the three sub-populations has been and will continue to be met. They maintain that wolves should not be relisted in Montana and that keeping the species federally listed in Wyoming complies with the ESA. State officials also say Montana has proved it can manage wolves and that existing protective regulatory laws ensure wolf conservation will continue into the future.

FWP is preparing wolf hunting proposals for the 2010 and 2011 seasons, including season dates, quotas, and management units. Proposals approved by the FWP Commission will be available for public review and comment before any are formally adopted.

If the federal court orders wolves to be relisted, control would again—as it was before delisting—be guided by federal regulations, and hunting seasons may not be an option.

Montana has said it will continue to pursue all legal options to keep the recovered wolf population delisted.